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Letter dated 5 December 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Colombia to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to request you, as President of the Security Council for December, in connection with the consideration of the situation in West Africa and the meeting to be held on 18 December, to have the document entitled "Regional approaches to conflict management in Africa" (see annex)* circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Alfonso **Valdivieso**
Ambassador, Permanent Representative

* The annex is being circulated in the language of submission.

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[Original: English]

Regional Approaches to Conflict Management in Africa

Acknowledgement

The International Peace Academy is very pleased to have been asked by the Permanent Mission of Colombia to collaborate in the organization and conduct of a meeting for the Security Council and members of the United Nations Secretariat on "Regional Approaches to Conflict Management in Africa" during the August 2001 Colombian Presidency of the Council. We wish to commend the leadership and commitment of the Colombian Mission to the United Nations, and the personal involvement of Minister of Foreign Affairs Guillermo Fernandez de Soto, in utilizing its Presidency of the Security Council to address this important issue at the very moment when African leaders and civil society are intent on strengthening their conflict prevention and management capacities. We are deeply grateful to Ambassador Alfonso Valdivieso for initiating this project. IPA's long and close relationship with the Security Council members together with the ongoing work of our Africa Program in seeking to strengthen the capacity of African regional and sub-regional organizations lies at the heart of this collaboration.

Introduction

On August 8 2001, the Permanent Mission of Colombia to the United Nations, during its Presidency of the Security Council, and the International Peace Academy co-hosted a meeting on Regional Approaches to Conflict Management in Africa. The purpose of this meeting was to facilitate an informal discussion on the advantages and potential pitfalls for the United Nations system, including in particular for the Security Council, of approaching conflicts in Africa from a regional perspective, with an emphasis on West Africa and the Great Lakes region.

This report is organized in two parts. First, the report includes a concise summary of the presentations that stimulated the substantive discussion among participants. Second, the report highlights a number of politically relevant issues raised during the discussion that may shape future engagements of the Security Council in conflict management in Africa.

Summary of the presentations

1. A conceptual overview[1]

The nature and complexity of conflicts can be defined and clarified through a Regional Conflict Formation framework. This framework is explained through four main points.

First, conflicts are regional. Most of the conflicts that confront the international community are not intra-state, as is commonly said, but consist of networks of conflict situations that link entire regions into what are known as *regional conflict formations*. These conflicts are linked through a variety of negative processes, including invasion, subversion, collapse of state capacities, cross-border ethnic or religious solidarities, smuggling, looting, arms trafficking, and forced population movements.

Second, regional conflict formations include regional military, political, economic, and social networks, which are in turn often linked to global networks. For instance, most arms are produced, and most cocaine, opium, diamonds, and coltan sold, outside conflict zones.

Third, a regional strategy links measures addressing all elements of a regional conflict formation and should be comprehensive not only geographically but functionally, in addressing all factors promoting conflict: linkages of key actors within sub-regions such as armed groups; provision of security and relief to affected

[1] Presentation by Dr. Barnett Rubin, Director of Studies, Centre on International Co-operation, New York University. This is the full text.

populations, targeting the youths, who play significant roles in transnational conflicts, etc.

Finally, a regional approach needs to include regional and/or sub-regional actors. Their role will vary depending on several factors, including the structure of both the conflict and the region, and the capacities of the region as such and its components, including states, regional or sub-regional intergovernmental organizations, and civil society networks.

2. Regional approach to conflict management in West Africa[2]

West Africa is ripe for a regional approach to conflict management. While emphasis on regional management of security issues is not new to West Africa, the concept of the region has been refined and expanded during the 1990s. Since the end of the Cold War, leaders in the region as in the rest of Africa, have recognized that a country by country approach does not address the root causes of conflicts comprehensively. Since the civil war in Liberia, conflicts have escalated, unleashing significant humanitarian consequences across borders.

Frustrated with the international community, and experiencing declining confidence in the UN, West Africa sought to create some degree of self-sufficiency. This has been reflected in the revised charter that has included a clause allowing ECOWAS to intervene before informing the Security Council (chapter 5 of the Protocol).

The emergent framework is integrative, and is intended to complement the national approach, as well as to bring the UN closer to the theatre of conflicts in West Africa. It is based on an elaborate all-inclusive strategy for conflict management, which gives ECOWAS the role of the interlocutor in the region.

The effectiveness of the strategy, however, depends on the Security Council's support in boosting and creating the required capacities. In this regard, the recommendation by the Inter Agency Task Force for the creation of a regional UN Office for West Africa is an opportunity to catalyze building of such capacity in ECOWAS. The office would also enhance the Council's understanding of the regional dynamics, improve its reaction time, and facilitate an effective UN partnership with ECOWAS and other actors in the region. USAID and the EU have developed a regional approach for West Africa, which can be relevant to the UNSC.

3. A regional approach to security in the Great Lakes Region[3]

A concentric circle approach is a useful framework for conflict management in the Great Lakes region. Under this approach, the nation, the region, and the international community would have interrelated responsibilities that would facilitate strengthening state structures, encourage civil society participation, promote good neighborliness and regional economic integration, and facilitate full UN involvement in conflict management. The adoption of a regional approach for the Great Lakes region is a desirable framework to complement and reinforce existing regional peace initiatives such as the Arusha and Lusaka processes. A regional approach may also facilitate the disarmament of negative forces, address security concerns of neighboring states, and explore possibilities for a regional conference as either a one-off event or a permanent process for addressing problems in the region on a continuous basis.

A critical challenge in the Great Lakes is state collapse in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the only country with potential to play a hegemonic role. If this state is to become an effective partner in the resolution of conflicts in the region, its rehabilitation must be a primary concern. The concentric circles approach can provide for such reconstruction while dealing with sensitive issues such as the illegal exploitation of natural resources and the interests of foreign and negative forces and actors involved in the region.

Summary of the discussion[4]

A number of politically relevant issues that may shape future reflection and action by the Security Council with respect to Regional Approaches to Conflict Management in Africa were raised. Following are the salient points.

1. The scope of regional approaches to conflict management

The scope of regional approaches needs to be defined relative to national approaches, possibility of success, and regional perceptions.

Regional approaches should complement rather than replace national and global approaches to conflict

[2]Presentation by Professor Margaret Vogt, Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary General, Department of Political Affairs, United Nations.

[3]Presentation by Professor Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa.

[4]Dr. Omar Bakhet, Director, Emergency Response Division, United Nations Development Program and Professor Guy Martin, African Studies Program, New York University, and Under Secretary General Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict served as discussants. Their views as well as those of other participants are reflected in this section.

management. Regional approaches are neither a panacea nor cost free, and are not conceived to substitute national or global approaches. Hence, it is important that they be guided by clear objectives, respect for the opinion and role of countries concerned, and good partnerships between the Security Council and sub-regional organizations without abandoning national approaches. In addition, there are a number of issues on the global agenda with intimate links to conflicts, such as drugs and small arms, that are dealt with under the principle of shared responsibility. Global approaches continue to be valid to address global threats that worsen conflict situations.

The success of a regional approach is contingent on a number of factors. To be successful, regional approaches require, first, that main actors behind a conflict management strategy accept and agree with the definition of the region; second, that regional actors have positive perceptions of actors outside of the region (e.g., the Security Council); third, where relevant, the existence of a benign well-intentioned hegemon willing to build and sustain cohesion in the region, and willing to provide the necessary leadership; fourth that the interests of major powers do not collide with the development of a regional approach.

Regional approaches are desirable but the international community's perceptions may not coincide with those of the region creating limitations to effective conflict management. Differences in perceptions between regional actors and the international community (including the Security Council) may limit the effectiveness of regional approaches for conflict management. These differences may relate, for example, to the legitimacy of a government, the dimension of a humanitarian crisis, or the root causes of a conflict (national or regional origin). The dilemma, however, is which perception should prevail in defining a response to a crisis, i.e., the regional or the international perception. Furthermore, there is the risk that regional initiatives can be used as an excuse for the non-involvement of the international community in a specific situation.

2. The Security Council and regional approaches to conflict

Regional approaches create a number of challenges for the Security Council.

There are many difficulties in defining a region. Conflicts consist of networks expanding outward from one or several conflict cores, spreading in ways that may or may not correspond to geographical regions. Regions, therefore, are a dynamic and changing concept. Does a "region" defined in the Security Council to address the issue of refugees in a particular situation coincide with that defined to address the illicit traffic of small arms and light weapons? Does it coincide with perspectives of regional actors?

The right time for regional approaches in the Security Council may be difficult to determine. There are doubts as to the appropriate time to implement a regional approach. The many phases of conflict management going from conflict prevention strategies to successful peacebuilding programs offer a number of possible instances for Security Council intervention, given the range of instruments at its disposal. At what point should the Security Council opt for a regional approach?

Sovereignty continues to be a central pillar of the work of the Security Council. Historically, sovereignty has been a pillar of the international system. It is enshrined in international law and embedded in the UN Charter. However, a dissenting view cautions that in situations where governments lack legitimacy and populations do not identify with them, national and international law may become inapplicable and problematic for Security Council action. In addition, two views prevail on the responsibility of the Council with regard to conflict management strategies at the state or the regional levels. For some, the Council should remain focused on the state, drawing on its Charter and cautioned by the risk of over reaching. Accordingly, the challenge lies in finding ways to strengthen the state rather than weakening it. For the others, Council action should be guided by the realities on the ground. For them, the Council needs to remain highly flexible, considering each conflict situation on its merits and adopting a regional approach or a regional strategy, when deemed appropriate.

An accurate "scaling" of a conflict by the Security Council determines, in many cases, its own ability to incorporate a regional approach into its work. It is an important factor that builds into the politics of the Security Council's decision-making machinery. Available resources for conflict management are often limited, and regional approaches may provide a basis for a clear determination of the scope and nature of conflict. Moreover, given the complexity and scale of conflicts, the Council may need to consider engaging in fewer

cases, in a manner that produces positive consequences, rather than spread itself.

The Security Council and regional actors may not be ready yet to build solid partnerships. Many regional and sub-regional organizations are too fragile to cultivate coherence and consensus among states, or have institutions devoted predominantly to economic integration, lacking the capacity to engage in areas related to peace and security.

Regional approaches facilitate a deeper understanding of the complexity and dynamics of conflicts and the roles and agendas of various actors. Regional approaches open a space for national, regional and global actors to adopt multi-layered but integrated responses. In this connection, the Council needs to engage in better analysis of conflict situations and articulate strategic responses that go beyond military security perspectives. This would increase confidence in the Council at the regional level. Arria Formula meetings with regional representatives and closer interaction with specialized agencies and organs of the UN system that utilize the regional approach are steps in the right direction.

Regional perceptions of the Security Council matter. Regional perspectives tend to be positive when the Council is guided in its actions by principles, such as evenhandedness, which give it moral authority (for instance, in Sierra-Leone, Liberia, or Burundi).

3. Regional approaches in Africa: Final comments

Specific references were made in the discussion to regional approaches in West Africa and the Great Lakes. Some examples follow:

Regional Self-Help Initiatives in Africa have implications for the implementation of regional approaches. Africa is witnessing a positive trend in neighborhood self-help, as neighboring states lead initiatives without reference to the Security Council as in Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra-Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, and Lesotho. On the one hand, there are those who believe that this should be welcomed because it creates opportunities for African solutions to African problems. In this view, regional approaches should be applied at the request of regional actors. Others, however, argue that these initiatives are unsustainable because, unlike elsewhere in the world, where "neighborhood initiatives" are animated by a sense of common purpose or values, these are conspicuously absent or unarticulated in Africa. Without any coherent common/shared values, sub-regional activism has emerged in an ad-hoc manner, in response to immediate needs. The success of such initiatives, therefore, depends heavily on the support of the international community.

Regional powers in Africa committed to peace and security are central to successful regional approaches. Nigeria in West Africa is viewed as an important partner for peace, and an essential engine for ECOWAS. In the Great Lakes region, however, the larger country is in a peculiar situation of a "dead giant" whose neighbors are preying on it. Unlike West Africa or Southern Africa, the Great Lakes currently lacks of a regional hegemon with vision and ability to help create a coherent peace and security initiative.

Regional approaches create a number of challenges for regional organizations in Africa. Some of these challenges are in the areas of coordination and partnership with the Security Council and other regional or sub-regional organizations. Regional organizations have found themselves at the forefront of intervention in spite of their limited capacities. The UN, and the Security Council in particular, must contribute to building regional capacity, supporting a common approach by regional actors and enhancing their role as mediators, facilitators and monitors of peace initiatives as well as antennae for tension spots. Although partnership with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) has been limited, it can provide lessons for sub-regional conflict management. With its transformation to the African Union, the critical issue is how the Council can support the new body to follow up and build on progress made by the OAU.